

On Transformation of Funeral Practices in Japan Related to the Demographic Transition

SHIMANE, Katsumi¹

要旨：本論文の目的は、日本の葬送儀礼の変化の原因を人口転換モデルの観点から説明することにある。

互助によって実施されていた伝統的な形態の葬儀は、20世紀後半の高度経済成長と都市化によって大きく変化した。特に労働や食料などの無償提供による相互扶助は、金銭による援助（香典）にとって代わり、家族はそれによって葬儀サービスを業者から「買う」ことになった。「葬儀の商業化」「葬儀の近代化」である。

こうした変化は、多産少死によって農村部に過剰になった人口が都市部に流入して労働者化したことによって生じたものである。現在、ベトナムでも同様の変化が起こっているが、そこでは家族は都市と農村においてそれぞれのコミュニティに両属した状態である。しかし日本では都市の家族はコミュニティから切り離されて孤立しており、葬儀の遂行にはさまざまな問題が生じている。

1990年代から日本の葬儀は近代になり二度目の転換を経験している。具体的には自然葬や樹木葬などのように墓石を必要としない葬儀の出現である。これらは人口転換により家族の形態や価値観が変化し、庶民レベルにおいては近代的な家制度の維持ができなくなったことを意味している。またまったく葬儀を行わずに死体を「処理」するだけの「直葬」という現象も少しずつではあるが現れてきている。これらは、高齢者世代が死後の問題を自己決定したり、看取りや葬儀を行う後継世代にきょうだい数が少ないために、従来のような葬儀を維持できなくなったためであると考えられる。

家族構造と価値観の変化に対応するために経済産業省は「ライフエンディング産業」研究会を立ち上げて、高齢者の生活サポートに資するサービス産業の在り方を模索し始めた。

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キーワード：Funeral ceremony, Demographic transition, METI, End-of-life stage

Introduction

Japan attained modernization relatively earlier than other Asian nations. Nevertheless, Japan maintains the traditional family system as well as traditional social relationships. This fact was once considered one of the strengths of Japanese society. However, the traditional value system and traditional social relationships have recently been collapsing very rapidly. The Japanese value system seemed to continue unchanged through modernization. Why has the Japanese value system been undergoing such a rapid change now?

In this paper, I will try to show the transformation of Japanese social relationships by looking at the changes in funeral practices. I found changes have taken place in two stages; the first stage is the modernization of funeral practices after World War II; the second stage occurred at the end of the 20th century. These changes are usually explained by economic factors and lifestyle changes. However, here, I would like to use the Demographic Transition Theory to explain these changes. Demographic change in Japan caused changes in the family structure, but the value system did not change at the

same time. It occurred later after a time lag. Lastly, I will give a brief view of a new strategy to cope with these changes; this strategy was devised by the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry; (METI), an agency that governs the Japanese economic activities.

Japanese Traditional Funerals

I wrote another paper about traditional Japanese funerals.¹⁾ It is believed that there are almost no places where such traditional funerals are still conducted today. In these traditional funerals, villagers proceeded to the graveyard carrying the deceased in *koshi* or a closed litter. We called this funeral procession “*nobe-okuri*.” This part was the main rite of the traditional ceremony. Most of the bodies then were buried in a graveyard near the village. In those days, neighbors offered rice and other food to the bereaved family. Women in the community cooked the food. The funeral meal was served to the guests and those who helped with the funeral. The offered food, money, and labor were recorded in a notebook. When a new funeral occurred in the same community, the recipient family had to “return” the equivalent amount of food and labor as had been offered to them. Though this system of mutual help, people within the traditional Japanese society were able to manage funerals that needed a lot of money

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1 Professor, Department of Sociology, Senshu University
shimane@isc.senshu-u.or.jp

and labor.

Funerals in Vietnam

To compare the traditional Japanese funeral ceremony with the funeral ceremony of another society, I discuss one case of a recent funeral rite in Vietnam. I had a chance to participate in and observe several Vietnam funeral ceremonies in 2011, and interviewed the family members who organized these ceremonies.

The grandmother of my colleague's family passed away at a hospital in Hanoi. The next day, the family organized a funeral service in their home in Hanoi. Many persons who knew my colleague's grandmother and her family members visited her home to say good-bye to her and make a call of condolence to her family members. The condolence callers registered their names, paid their respects, and gave funeral gift money. The family of the deceased said to me later that they could pay all the expenditures with the funeral gift money from the condolence callers. This custom is very similar to the traditional custom in Japan described above.

The next day after the funeral service in Hanoi, the deceased and her family moved to her original hometown about 30km from Hanoi. Many people saw her off with sorrow. In her hometown, there also were many people waiting for her. A long funeral procession continued to the cemetery, where she was buried in a grave in the field, which people from the village had prepared previously. After finishing the ceremony, family members invited the people who assisted with the ceremony to a feast. Women in the community worked to serve dinner to these people, just as in the traditional Japanese ceremony.

I found several ideas from this case. The first one is that the Vietnamese funeral ceremony has some similarities to the traditional Japanese one. In particular, the Vietnamese have the custom of giving funeral gift money to the bereaved, and there is mutual help between the local community members. Their relationships are very tight and strong.

The second finding is that Vietnamese people who live in urban areas have multiple community groups, one in the city and another in a rural area. So it is necessary for them to organize two separate funeral ceremonies, one in the city and another in their hometown.

At the other ceremony that I observed, the family brought the body with them to a province 300 km from Hanoi, and they had another funeral service there then buried the deceased. The family members, especially her sons, have close ties with job groups and residents in the city, and also they have

strong ties with relatives and tribe members in their hometown as well.

So the organization of funeral ceremonies in the countryside of Vietnam is similar to traditional Japanese funerals.

Modernized Funerals in Japan

Japanese funerals, however, have been changing now because of the reasons I will explain later. The following are descriptions of what is typical in modern Japanese funerals.

One important change that has occurred affects the cleaning and purifying of the body of the deceased. While in traditional funeral ceremonies, this practice was done by family members, it is normally done by the nurses in the hospital, it is now a service party provided by funeral undertakers. Another change is in regards to flower wreathes. In the past, these funeral gifts were displayed outside of the funeral home, so people would see them as they arrived for the funeral reception. Now, however, these wreathes are placed inside the hall where the ceremony is held.

These halls themselves are another significant change that has occurred. An important part of traditional Japanese funerals was a funeral procession that would lead to a graveyard. Presently, though, funerals are typically carried out at funeral halls, or occasionally at family homes or temples.

When people first arrive at a funeral reception, they write their names and addresses in a register. At this time, they give *Koden*, or funeral gift money, to the bereaved family. The amount of *koden* depends on the givers' social status or their relation with the deceased. For example, from 5,000 yen to 10,000 yen will be given by company colleagues, 10,000 yen to 30,000 yen will be given by close friends and those people indebted to the deceased, and from 30,000 to 100,000 yen is given by immediate family members and other relatives. The family will use that money to buy various services and goods from funeral undertakers.

An important part of funerals in Japan involves the cremation of the body. To begin with, when a body is sent into a crematory furnace, the family members of the deceased are present. After the incineration, the family members then pick the bones out of the ashes with chopsticks and put them into a jar. This rite has a very important meaning in a Japanese funeral.

Finally, after completing all the rites, the bereaved family offers food to thank those people who remained until these rites were completed.

The changes described above are related to changes within society. In the past, funerals were

carried out through the principle of communal reciprocity: in short an exchange of labor and goods within a community. Today in Japan, however, the condolence money given by the funeral attendees is used to buy funeral services. To cope with this change, a new profession of funeral service providers has been established. Takako Tamagawa called this process “commercialization of funerals.” Funeral practices in Japan have thus modernized.

Influence of Urban Lifestyle

One question that should be addressed is, how did the “commercialization of funerals” occur? According to Shoichi Inoue, the change began as early as the turn of the 19th century. I basically agree with Inoue, but I want to emphasize that the change did not happen all over Japan at once. Rather, the change first began to occur in cities while rural areas retained the old customs up until recently. The first cause of change to the funeral is the penetration of an urban lifestyle among people.

Twenty-five years ago in Japan, an innovative movie was launched very successfully. It is titled *Ososhiki*, meaning “Funeral.” The movie describes a couple who lived in a city, received a sudden notice that a parent had died, and returned to their hometown to conduct a funeral.

The couple experiences hardship in arranging this funeral as it was their first time in doing that and the movie describes their struggle comically. The movie showed people who did not know how to conduct their parent’s funeral. At the time of the launch of the movie, people in rural areas still preserved some of the old customs, especially, receiving support from the community, but urbanization transformed people’s lifestyles and weakened communal ties, and this caused a change in funeral practices.

Explanation by Demographic Explanation

To explain these changes in funeral ceremony in Japan, now I would like to discuss a demographic factor. Emiko Ochiai, a sociologist of family, used the Demographic Transition Model to explain Japan’s family transformation. I believe that her theory is very useful to explain the changes of family structure and social values in Japan.

The Demographic Transition Model is defined as follows: “the pace of the population increase changes; from a ‘high birth rate and high death rate society’, through a ‘high birth rate and low death rate society’, and then lastly reached to a ‘low birth rate and low death rate society’. As a result of this process of change, a certain generation experiences a sharp increase in population. This is exactly

what has happened in Japan over the past three generations.

In Japan in 1950, the population of those who were between the ages of 0 and 25 years old rapidly increased. During the years prior to 1950, Japan lost many people because of WWII, but the population continued to increase up to the time of the postwar baby boomers. Baby boomers belong to a single generation but their population doubled from the previous generation. 25 years later in 1975, however, this generation was now between the ages of 25 and 50 years old, and the population of the following generation was considerably lower. Finally, in 2000 the population of the most recent generation has dropped sharply, not returning to the population level of the 1950’s generation. Thus, Japan has plunged into a society with a declining birthrate.

People who were between 0 and 25 years old in 1950 have many children born from a single couple. In a society with “high birth rate and low death rate,” many children survived to become adults. They have lots of brothers and sisters. Because they had many siblings, many of them did not have to stay in their rural hometowns with their parents. Even if they wanted to stay there, only the oldest brother had the right to inherit the house and farmland, so other brothers had to choose between becoming laborers or salaried employees in cities. They got married and made their homes in cities. As they did not have to go back to their hometowns, their lives began to be centered on urban values and lifestyles. Cities had high mobility and urbanites rarely took firm root in a community; their relationships with their communities became very weak. Therefore, they received support not from the community but from occupational affiliations, for example company colleagues, etc.

Funerals that were once supported by a community changed to funerals conducted and managed by the family alone. People who moved from rural areas to cities had limited knowledge of funeral customs. In addition, they were employed workers, so they were not able to take a day off to help with other people’s funerals. To cope with this situation, a profession to provide funeral services emerged. Work-related colleagues attended funerals and brought *koden*, consolation gift money, to the family. The family used the large amount of money collected from the many attendees for the purchase of commercial services from funeral undertakers as well as food to be served to the attendees.

This new type of funeral practice took root during the high economic growth period, and funerals continued to be more and more luxurious until the bubble economy collapsed. After the bubble col-

lapse, people began to question the cost of funerals. Also, more and more old people began to worry about after-death arrangements. What caused such a change?

The progress of an aging society was one of the causes for change in traditional funeral services. As I mentioned before, if someone, an employee of a certain company, or his or her family member dies, company colleagues offer condolence gift money to the family, and this money usually adds up to a large amount. However, today, people live much longer in age, and they may die some decades later after retirement. This means people do not receive support from their companies for their funeral.

As I mentioned, the communal relationship in urban areas has already been weakened. Consequently, it became the role of the family alone to attend the last moments of a dying person, and to conduct a funeral for the deceased. As a result, funerals themselves are reported to have become simpler and smaller. This change is because families are no longer able to spend much money for expensive funerals and feasts.

Ongoing Change in Funerals

The change seems to be moving in an unexpected direction. The values which determined traditional funerals have been rapidly weakened. For example, since the 1990s there have been people who prefer scattering-ash. The ash is scattered at sea or in mountains. These practices require no gravestones. Also, recently, an increasing number of people prefer a "tree burial." Instead of placing a stone marker, people plant a tree or scatter ash under trees. This practice does not require a grave, either. For those who lament that no grave means no way to remember the loved one, "*temoto kuyo*" or a portable shrine or memento is an alternative way that is provided in a form of a small pendent containing the ash.

Even those who prefer a very different funeral from the traditional one usually carry out funeral and burial rites anyway because they want to keep the connection with the dead in some way. However, we are now facing a totally unexpected new phenomenon. That is the emergence of the people who think no rites are necessary at all for the disposal of the dead. For example, if a person dies in a hospital, the body is kept in a certain place for a certain time, and then sent directly to a crematory without a funeral ceremony at all. The ash jar will be sent to an anonymous grave. This way of disposing the dead called "*chokuso*" (direct disposal) was originally jargon used in the funeral industry. The *chokuso* was done not for ordinary people but for

the unknown. The term was used by the local authorities when burying the unknown. Today, however, it is reported that people choose *chokuso* for their family members and relatives and that the number of these people is increasing. We do not know yet whether *chokuso* will increase in the future or not. One thing is sure that the Japanese way of funerals is departing from the "traditional" ways. How we can name these changes in funeral rites? "Post-modernized funeral"? Now I don't want to use the word, "post-modern," but it is sure that a new phase occurred in Japan.

Change in Lifestyle of Aged People

I talked about the same topic in Vietnam and I was asked; "Did Japanese families become cold-hearted, not paying respect even to deceased parents or siblings?"

For Vietnamese people who share the Asian way of thinking, it might be hard to believe this change was actually happening in Japan. In the past Japanese people believed ancestor worship was a very important part of their lives. They paid a lot of respect to their parents and maintained strong family ties. Why were such ties lost? Emiko Ochiai would say that the Demographic Transition Model could again explain the change in family values as well. I will try to give my own interpretation.

In a traditional society, a couple was expected to have many children in order to secure the labor power of the next generation that would support the couple in old age. This would allow the parents to have a happy old life surrounded by many children and grandchildren. However, as society becomes further modernized, having many children begins to be a burden to a family. If children are not given a good education, poverty is likely inevitable. People began to feel more secure in having a small number of children and giving them a good education. Thus helping their children gain the ability to survive in a modern society. Also, as society advances, we have better medical care and welfare programs, and society becomes increasingly stable. Then, instead of raising many children or even having no children, with their savings people could somewhat manage their post-retirement lives. More people began to think this way.

The Japanese traditional idea of family was that of multiple generations living together under the same roof. However, this idea was created out of the necessity of the time, when medical care and welfare systems were not well developed. The government stated as follows: "Before the government pension system was established, elderly people had to depend upon their children's personal care, or

use their savings, or money. However, industrialization and urbanization resulted in an increasing number of nuclear families and aged households. For many people, it became more difficult to rely upon personal family care in their old age.” (Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry) To cope with this situation, the government introduced various programs, and today, elderly people enjoy more freedom, thanks to advanced medical care and pension and welfare programs in Japan. It is reported that more and more elderly couples think it a good idea to live alone even after losing a partner. This is, of course, possible if elderly people have enough money to enjoy this freedom and independence. It is true that the percentage of aged people living alone has been increasing year by year.

After a twenty- to thirty-year delay compared with Europe, Japanese families seem to be becoming more individual-oriented.

In fact, the current aging generation is believed to have more money to sustain their old age. It is because they worked during the high economic growth period and accumulated substantial assets. This generation also has better pension and medical programs.

People of this generation were once pioneers in the creation of a new lifestyle after WW II. They lived up to their creed “two children (in a family).” Rather than regarding the idea of living with an oldest son together, or happily with grandchildren, they now have different ideas about their old age, preferring freedom and a more easygoing lifestyle. Even though they are enjoying their own lifestyle, however, the time will come when they lose a partner or become physically disabled. They will need someone’s help and care. People will eventually die and need someone to prepare their funerals. Can they buy all the services they may need in their old age with just money? Will money alone secure them a happy old age, or happy “end of life”?

Strategy of Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry: Creating End-of- Life Industry

In November 2010, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) set up a committee to study the end-of-life-stage industry. The “end-of-life stage” is a term coined by METI. Everyone becomes old and faces the end of life. Someone has to take care of these individuals. Japan had an implicit norm that children would take care of their parents, so very few people thought of buying comfortable services from other people. However, Japanese society has changed from a traditional one dependent on a family and a close-knit community where peo-

ple help each other. With this change, it has become the responsibility of individuals to manage their own old age and close the final chapter by themselves, but as “cost” is needed for the period from birth to adult, some scholars say that “cost” is also needed for the end of life and dying. This is quite a harsh view, but it is true when considered philosophically.

In a traditional society, a large family and a community would pay for the “end-of-life” costs. By creating various social networks, people frequently exchanged goods, labor, and money in reciprocity networks, and prepared for their old age and death. In other words, people routinely “invested” in others little by little throughout their lives. This can explain why community members offered labor and food “for free” in a traditional funeral. However, Japanese people today seem to have departed from the unconditional bearing of costs that arise simply by being “a community member,” “a work colleague,” or even as “a child”. In the past, Japanese people universally believed that “the oldest son should take care his parents.” Today, however, the belief that “children should take care of their parents” itself is becoming weakened. For practical reasons as well, it begins to be difficult to take care of one’s parents, for a person who was born in a “society of low birth rate” and does not have siblings to support each other,

Once, we demanded unconditional government reform in social welfare and social security programs. However, because the high-growth-economy period has ended, and sufficient tax revenues are no longer expected, it has become difficult for the government to carry out such policies. Now, new commercial services have been emerging. These services include attending to elderly people who do not have anyone else to take them to a hospital or other places, or bathing the disabled, cleaning their bodies, or doing laundry for them.

There is another service for those who cannot go out to visit their family graves; a surrogate will go and clean the family grave for them. Another service includes financial management for the elderly. The problem is that there are some bad providers who cheat elderly people out of their money. Another problem is that services are not well coordinated so every time the situation or condition changes, elderly people have to find a new provider. Under this situation, METI set up a committee to develop a high-quality, well-coordinated service industry to support the last stage of elderly people’s lives.

We do not know at this moment how this effort will take shape in the future. However, it is important to understand that Japanese society has been

transforming to such an extent that a new industrial framework needs to be established. The main point is that Japanese traditional systems and values that depended upon families, that is “Japanese Familism” or “Japanese-style welfare”, have been collapsing. By looking at the transformation of Japanese funeral practices, the last great necessity for people, one can understand why the funeral industry has emerged and how the commercialization of funerals has occurred in Japan.

After the Earthquake Disaster

METI's strategy was devised before March 11th when the big earthquake occurred followed by the tsunami and the nuclear plant accident. This unimaginable disaster may change the trend that has been discussed above.

The victims of the disaster area are striving hard to overcome difficulties through the bond and solidarity of local communities, and many couples have decided to marry and have a child in these heavy situations. What does this mean? During the post-war era, Japan created various programs and built up a system that allowed people to live comfortably in their old age. However, the natural disaster in this time disclosed the fact that even such a system is unable to serve as a solid foundation for a happy life. People may be re-evaluating the old family ties and social bonds now.

Nobody can predict how these trends will develop in the future. Once more it needs to be emphasized that what was considered “traditional” in Japanese society has been undergoing a great change.

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Notes :

- 1) Katsumi Shimane (Under printing).
- 2) METI, 2011.
- 3) Chizuko Ueno, 2011.

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